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3 On the Rules for the Royal Game of Ur

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In Babylon, on 3 November, 177–176 BC, the Babylonian scribe Itti-Marduk-balāṭu completed the careful writing of a most unusual cuneiform[1] tablet that included a grid on one side and two columns of closely-written text on the other, adding his name and the date at the end of the inscription. Itti-Marduk-balāṭu was a highly-trained member of a distinguished scribal family who were descended from the scholar-scribe Mušēzib. For six generations his forbears had been concerned with esoteric cuneiform texts on astronomy and other learned matters. Itti-Marduk-balāṭu copied the inscription from a tablet that had belonged to, if it was not written by, a scholar from a different family, called Iddin-Bēl.

In time this particular tablet, like countless others, came to be buried in the ruins of Babylon, where it lay until local inhabitants turned it up around AD 1880. Shortly afterwards the tablet arrived in the British Museum, where it was purchased together with one other tablet from a dealer, who offered it on account of its distinctive and unexpected appearance. The tablet was numbered Rm III, 6B, although it is now known as BM 33333B, and is referred to in this article as *BM*. A description was published shortly thereafter by T. G. Pinches, one of the assistants in the department, who could read cuneiform script (see Fig. 3.1):

> Tablet of unbaked clay, inscribed on the obverse with characters within lozenge-shapes, referring, apparently, to certain stars, and inscribed on the reverse with omens from the flight of birds: the *summatu*, or swallow, and the *ugagu*, or raven, being mentioned. The text bears the name of Siluku, or Seleucus, and was therefore written during the Selucaean era. Size, 4 in by 3¼ in.
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> Pinches 1886: 71, no. 33

Little attention was paid to this most unusual clay manuscript for many years thereafter. The Assyriologists F. L. Peiser and A. L. Oppenheim visited the museum independently, and each apparently copied the inscription. Oppenheim is known to have prepared a transliteration of the text but neither scholar published the results of his work. Nothing further occurred until 1956, when E. F. Weidner published a photograph of the grid side of the tablet and edited part of the text, using his colleagues' notes, in an article entitled 'Ein Losbuch in Keilschrift aus der Seleukidenzeit' (Weidner 1956: 174–80, 182–3), in which he argued that the inscription concerned a form of fortune-telling by lots.

By a strange chance a second tablet containing partly identical material was published by the Assyriologist J. Bottéro in the very same volume, under the title 'Deux Curiosités Assyriologiques (avec une note de Pierre Hamelin)' (Bottéro 1956: 16–25, 30–35). This document had formerly been in the private collection of Count Aymar de Liedekerke-Beaufort, but suffered a disastrous fate. The tablet was handed to a photographer shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, during which the photographer's studio, and the tablet, were destroyed, although the photograph that he had prepared somehow survived. It was this photograph that was copied and published by Professor Bottéro, who has generously made it available to the present writer for republication here. The Count's tablet carries no date, but judging from its Neo-Babylonian script, it is several centuries earlier than the Seleucid tablet *BM*, which itself stands at the end of a chain of scribal transmission. It is possible, although not certain, that this second document came from the southern Mesopotamian city of Uruk. This tablet will be referred to in this article as *DLB*.

In an important study published four years later that clarified the cuneiform expressions for play and games, B. Landsberger discussed the terminology in the published evidence, also quoting from Oppenheim's notes, and it was he who demonstrated that these two tablets must be concerned with a game (Landsberger 1960: 122–3; 127–9).

In fact, both scholars were correct.[2] As will be argued here, the tablet *BM* gives the rules for a board game which is to be identified as employing the later version of the board

1 This script is probably the oldest form of writing known. Cuneiform signs, which came to be impressed into moist clay with a cut reed sometime after 3000 BC, were originally purely pictographic, and represented words, ideas and, ultimately, sounds by means of childlike stylised drawings. The script evolved to the extent that true language could be expressed by a mixture of syllabic signs (e.g. 'ba'), ideograms expressing one word (e.g. KING) and determinatives (e.g. WOOD). In Mesopotamia proper it was used to write both Sumerian and Akkadian, the latter a branch of Semitic (related to Arabic and Hebrew), in its two dialects of Assyrian and Babylonian. The tablets discussed here are composed in Babylonian. By the time they came to be written, cuneiform writing had a pedigree of some three thousand years and was nearing its eventual extinction around the second century AD, when it was finally displaced by simpler and more adaptable alphabetic systems. Babylonian is now very well understood after more than 150 years' work since its initial decipherment by H. C. Rawlinson, Edward Hincks and others. Sumerian was the first language to be written in cuneiform, and its influence on cuneiform writing persisted for centuries after the language itself was no longer spoken. In the method characteristic of cuneiform texts, Babylonian words can be spelt out phonetically (and unambiguously), but can also be written in a form of shorthand whereby the word is conveyed by a Sumerian ideogram. Scribes could write a Sumerian word within an Akkadian text, and the reader would supply the Akkadian equivalent as he read, much as '£5' is automatically interpreted as 'five pounds' by a modern reader, even though the sign '£' contains no hint of the word's phonetic value. Usually this phenomenon presents no problem to Assyriologists, but sometimes a particular Akkadian equivalent is not known for certain. This situation has a bearing on the text of the rules studied in this article.

2 For subsequent remarks based on Landsberger's conclusions, see Koch-Westenholz 1995: 165; Stol 1995: 499; Dalley 1998: 174, and, for completeness' sake only, Hurowitz 1998: 272–3.

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